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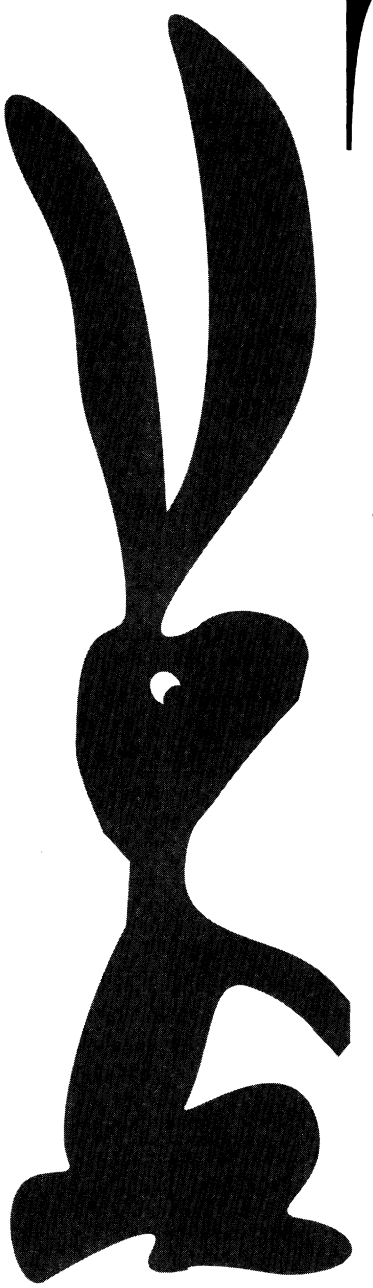

The cultural values and traditions that exist today in the African American community derive from a long line of human struggles throughout American history. Through oral traditions prevalent in folklore from the slavery era to the Harlem Renaissance coupled with traditions of African American art and literature, we can examine the cultural icon known as the trickster. The trickster archetype is multifaceted and assumes many positions within a given community. The role of the African American trickster and the use of this archetype in Romare Bearden's work, which represents contemporary African American life, is critiqued here. This essay focuses on the historical representations of the African American trickster archetype and explores implications for the use of this figure in the art classroom.

The role of the trickster figure is useful for integrating art with the larger curriculum. Traditionally, this figure is linked to powerless groups who long to transcend an oppressive social order (VanSertima, 1989), making it particularly attractive to the integration of secondary curriculum. For example, contextualizing African American artist, Romare Bearden, within an historical investigation of the Harlem Renaissance period, promotes an investigation of this often ignored period in American history. In the 1920s the concentration of African Americans in New York led to the cultural movement known as the Harlem Renaissance, which used art, music, and literature to demonstrate the creative and survival abilities of African Americans. Furthermore, the rebirth of African American creativity during

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this time, combined with lessons using the African American trickster survival theme, inspires a sense of integration of African American heritage essential for today's transformational multicultural curriculum. Historical and contemporary examinations of the African American trickster show the character as useful for better understandings of educational issues surrounding African Americans, as well as all Americans.

Examining the Trickster Role

The trickster role for African Americans is that of defiant representative for the oppressed group (Jeffries, 1994). The primary goal of the trickster is social nonconformity by redefinition of norms for life and existence in mainstream American society (Jeffries, 1997). The literature reveals the trickster role as serving the evolving needs of African American communities (Jeffries, 1994, 1997; Roberts, 1989; VanSertima, 1989). Scholars who debate the roots of the African American trickster examine this figure as a conception of West African, European, and/or American Indian influence (Bascom, 1992). Some believe that social, economic, and physical conditions in West African countries are responsible for creating the trickster used in African American oral, written, and artistic representations.

The West African trickster provides a foundation for understanding the African American trickster figure. It is this West African trickster that heavily influenced the African American trickster according to Pelton (1980) who focuses on this icon as it exists in West Africa. The majority of involuntary African immigrants to the United States originated in the West African countries of Ghana, Mali, Nigeria, and Togo, bringing with them folklore using the trickster as a spider, rabbit, or other animal motif. The trickster figure in African American culture evolved through the slave narrative, which describes this archetype as a free spirit whose behavior is complex and contradictory. This figure is often shown pursuing wisdom, cunning, or power and attempting to redefine the social order (Bascom, 1992).

Conceptions of the Trickster in Folk Tales

African American folk tales in the southern United States include the trickster appearing in a story called "Trickster Seeks Endowments" (Bascom, 1992), where the trickster appears in a variety of physical forms. For example, the trickster is a rabbit in a tale that requires him to bring to a larger, more powerful figure, blackbirds from a fig tree, a snake, and the tears of a deer, in exchange for the long tail he desires. The trickster as rabbit fools the blackbirds by telling them that his bag has said they could not fill it. To prove the bag wrong, the blackbirds fly in. When he presents the bag to the powerful figure, a rattlesnake becomes the second demand in exchange for the long tail. Trickster as rabbit plays a similar

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As an artist, art teacher, gallery owner, and writer, Bearden worked to support young African American talent and to merge the work of young, new artists into the larger American art scene. Bearden's life and work served a variety of community functions, and his image is reflective of the historical and more recent representations of the trickster archetype in African American culture.

trick on the snake by telling it that his pole has said that it was longer than the snake. The snake lies beside the pole to prove it wrong and trickster as rabbit ties the snake to the pole and delivers it to the powerful figure.

The powerful figure makes a third demand for deer tears. Through his cleverness, trickster as rabbit convinces the deer that the tree bragged that it was bigger than the deer's head. The deer agrees to a contest and allows his head to be tied to the tree for measurement. Trickster as rabbit chokes the deer and collects the tears. Presenting this final offering to the powerful figure, trickster as rabbit is told that since he has demonstrated his power and dominated his world, he does not need a long tail. This folk tale illustrates a power figure's fear toward the trickster's cunning and ability to change the social order.

Conceptions of the Trickster in Pop Culture

Baker's work (1994) extends this examination of the rabbit as trickster through contemporary pop culture. Contemporary folk tales and literary creations may have idealized and simplified the trickster figure, however, the archetype maintains the purpose of addressing societal themes. The most popularized rabbit trickster, Bugs Bunny "seems to be merely a figure of fun and entertainment. Still, Bugs Bunny also fits the characteristics of trickster, both in the way he is personified and in the role he fills in popular culture" (1994, p. 150). Bugs Bunny is often portrayed as a self-centered character that uses his physical endurance and psychological flexibility to overcome power. In the "Gorilla My Dreams" episode, Bugs uses his cunning to outwit and escape a large, angry male gorilla by dressing as a helpless baby. Countless other Bugs Bunny episodes illustrate this trickster's ability to manipulate situations, in which he has little or no power, to his advantage.

The Trickster in the Life and Work of Romare Bearden

The Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s was a key developmental period for a number of African American artists. During this time, Bearden's family moved to Harlem and their apartment was a gathering place for well-known black intellectuals from a variety of disciplines. Key figures such as Langston Hughes and W.E.B. Du Bois exposed the young Bearden to the philosophies of Booker T. Washington, Alain Locke, and Marcus Garvey. These individuals were constant influences on the developing artist's life, and their presence created an environment that encouraged the reflection of these influences in Bearden's work.

Because of these influences, Bearden's work has multiple extensions into the areas of civics, literature, music, theater, and dance and this multiplicity illustrates the trickster theme. His photomontages are an effective media for conveying images of memories and tradition because they bring together fragments of photographs that collectively tell many stories. For instance, Bearden often represents African Americans who emerge as heroes and leaders in the face of discrimination, buttressing the philosophy of Marcus Garvey. He presents African American life as universal and integrated into mainstream America through his art, which corresponds with the literary works of Zora Neale Hurston. This integration of African American art, African American civic ideas, and

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African American literary creations lends itself to discussions framed by the African American trickster archetype. Traditional depictions of the trickster frame this figure as a mediator between accepted and marginalized behaviors (Roberts, 1989; Pelton, 1980; Bascom, 1992). As an artist, art teacher, gallery owner, and writer, Bearden worked to support young African American talent and to merge the work of young, new artists into the larger American art scene. Bearden's life and work served a variety of community functions, and his image is reflective of the historical and more recent representations of the trickster archetype in African American culture.

Rationale for an Arts-based Integrated Curriculum

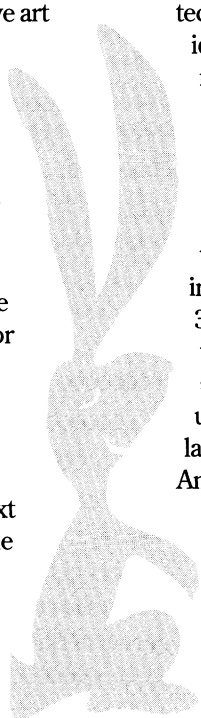
Dewey (1934) recognized that the arts had important consequences for stimulating the child's powers of observation and interest. He was fundamentally interested in the ways in which works of art concentrated and enlarged immediate experiences and how the arts moved people to an imaginative ordering and reordering of meanings (1934). Arts-based integrated curricula break the mechanical, the sporadic, and the routine and create learners who have a willingness to go beyond isolated facts to view issues within context (Sizer, 1992) and to discover the connectedness that is central to the human condition.

Integrated arts-based curriculum enables learners to perceive connections between the disciplines (Schramm, 1999). The sense of "connectedness" nurtured by an arts-based integrated curriculum enables students to perceive the relevance of education to their everyday lives. The student characteristics developed through an arts-based integrated curriculum, namely a sense of connectedness and habit of life long learning comprise essential components of the active citizen in a democratic society (Dewey, 1944). If society is to grow and flourish in the 21stcentury, it is vital that our young people have an ability to adapt to a transformed future coupled with a sense of community (Drake, 1993; Erickson, 1995).

Evidence (Bruner, 1985) suggests that learning is most efficient when students acquire understanding through practical activity, such as interaction with peers and environment. When students are able to relate what they learn to their own experience the knowledge assumes an increased importance that enhances mastery (Donaldson, 1978). The Getty Education Institute for the Arts (1997) has worked with policy makers, educators, parents, and students, pushing for the arts to be integrated throughout the curriculum to help students make connections across a broad range of subjects, cultures, and historical eras. Collaborative art experiences, such as mural design or music, theater, and dance performances, develop important social and workplace skills, including creativity and the ability to function both individually and as a team member (The Getty Education Institute for the Arts, 1997).

Linking the Trickster to an Arts Integrated Curriculum

Demonstrated in this text is the variety of positions the trickster can assume using the common theme of oppression overcoming power. Used in historical folk tales to inform and assist groups to conquer power imbalances, the trickster has also been used to warn oppressed groups of the danger involved in challenging power structures. Therefore, the use of this figure in historical and contemporary educational communities supports the use of the archetype in arts integrated curriculum. Using the role of the African American trickster within arts integrated curriculum offers students formal or informal mechanisms for understanding the complexities and realities of living in North America as a person of African descent. Arts integrated curricula reflect the influences of music, dance, theater, philosophy and literature. Initially, educators can begin with art historical inquiry and art critical inquiry that enable students to examine how artists are influenced by a variety of artistic styles, cultural influences and societal concerns. By layering Bearden's art with the trickster figure and linking this concept to these various curricular fields, students can learn techniques for expressing their cultural identity around styles and images that refer to their particular cultural heritage.



Integrating Bearden and the African American Trickster

Using the four-step art criticism technique (Feldman, 1967) that includes: 1) description, 2) analysis, 3) interpretation, and 4) judgment, teachers can engage students in a study of Bearden's work and enhance understandings of his themes by layering the concept of the African American trickster with a contextualization of the Harlem Renaissance.

Teachers can start by asking students to **describe** Bearden's *Blues at the Crossroads*. Teachers might ask, "Tell me what you see happening here?" or, "What is your overall impression of this image?"

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In response, students may notice the enlarged details—fingers, saxophone, piano keys, trumpet parts—and the brilliant pink background or the central female figure swaying seductively.

Next, teachers may ask students to continue the description with an **analysis** of *Blues at the Crossroads*. The teacher can probe with questions about the mood or the feeling of the work to enable students to analyze how the elements of art work together. Responses might include, "The enlarged details suggest the passion of the musicians" or, "The pink background reminds me of fiery, spontaneous, magical sounds that the music is creating."

Since **interpretation** is the most creative and thought provoking process for the students (Tollifson, 1990), the teacher may ask, "What does the artwork mean to you?" or, "What is the message?" The teacher can provide historical contextual information such as Bearden's background as a musician and songwriter. Like a musician, Bearden creates definite moods with his photomontages. In an effort to encourage students to extend and refine their interpretation beyond simple answers, teachers may wish to report that the trickster archetype is concerned with communication and expression of self, characteristics which are often musically based (Jeffries, 1994).

The final level of Feldman's technique is **judgment**. At this point, students should be able to state reasons for their interpretations and teachers should be able to make links between Bearden's art and other areas of the curriculum. For example, *Blues at the Crossroads* examined next to other Bearden photomontages enables students to articulate uniqueness to the African American community and embodiments of trickster behavior. Bearden's vast themes that encompass the human condition, genre, folklore, and myth can be explored. Student projects can include recombinations of parts of their own family photographs. These fragments, originally parts of photographs of people who shared the student's heritage, enable them to use forms of cultural communication that are unique to their community. Embodying African American trickster folktales in an essay to accompany the visual piece promotes literacy through the integration of visual, oral, and written mechanisms.

Conclusion

Educators can help students move within and learn from the complexities of the world and the complexities of how we construct the world through the African American trickster tradition. One of the trickster's goals is social nonconformity by redefinition of norms for life and existence in mainstream North American society (Jeffries, 1994). In a more complex sense, Bearden himself as trickster is played out in his unconventional photomontage and collage approach to art making. Inspired by the Civil Rights Movement of the mid 1960s, Bearden revolted against a whole confining tradition of canonical art work and mark making rules to create scenes from African American life. His innovative works communicate a longing for freedom from fixed ways of seeing, feeling, thinking, and acting, which is characteristic of an African American trickster.

Bearden's works are often politically charged in their attempts to communicate and articulate African American culture, making them socially significant and worthy as subjects of investigation within the traditions of African American tricksterism. Since both the word and the image are rhetorical devices that require art

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educators to help students engage in symbolic mode (i.e., "reading" the action in a visual text and responding accordingly), using the African American trickster theme as a mode of inquiry in the classroom, can enable students to respond to the subjects derived from African American genre and myth that Romare Bearden communicates in his work. By juxtaposing many images of varying size and viewpoints, he is able to visually convey a sense of disorientation and alienation, by spinning a complex story about the multivocality of African American texts, the weaving of colloquial voices into art, and the subversions, parodies, and appropriations of *American* life.

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